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RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 1920
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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5144
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3334
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5100
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1377
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0635
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4210
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9521
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6822
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 1306
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3751
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000929

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [EAID](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: ARCHBISHOP SUGGESTS PUSHING ACCOUNTABILITY COULD
DESTABILIZE SRI LANKAN DEMOCRACY

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A. BUTENIS. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: Roman Catholic Archbishop Ranjith told ambassador that pushing the GSL too hard on the war crimes accountability issue now could destabilize Sri Lankan democracy and would set back the cause of human rights. He reasoned that weakening the Rajapaksas -- who despite their public image were relative moderates in the Sri Lankan polity -- could backfire. Moreover, if Sri Lanka were denied GSP-plus or the U.S. were to enact strong economic sanctions, leading to a sharp downturn in the economy, Sri Lanka could suffer revolution from the right or a coup by the military, which now had a very strong position in society. Ambassador countered that this was an interesting perspective, but if the Rajapaksas were in fact moderates, they needed to show it. END SUMMARY.

POLITICAL ROLE OF THE CHURCH

12. (C) In a September 30 introductory meeting with Ambassador and PolChief, Roman Catholic Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith recounted the recent political evolution of Sri Lanka, of which he has been both an astute observer and important participant, and described the role of the Church in society. He noted that while he himself was a Sinhalese, he was very sympathetic to the plight of Tamils, who had suffered greatly from pogroms and discrimination by the majority and from the disastrous results of LTTE separatist ideology. He explained that the Church had played a key role in brokering talks between the GSL and the LTTE over the years, including the 2002 cease-fire agreement. After the war, the church was advocating publicly for the release of IDPs and other controversial positions. This had led to criticism from the Buddhist right and even death threats against the archbishop himself. This was the opposite of the leading role in reconciliation the archbishop believed Buddhists should have

been playing years ago.

RAJAPAKSA AND ACCOUNTABILITY

13. (C) Despite this criticism, the archbishop said he believed President Rajapaksa personally was a good man and in the constellation of Sri Lankan politics was a relative moderate (he reminded us that Rajapaksa used to attend human rights meetings in Europe as an opposition MP). Rajapaksa and his brothers were under great pressure from the Sinhalese Buddhist right, and any show of what would be perceived as weakness before the international community could result in their losing ground to much more extreme elements. Indeed, he argued that if something happened to the president there would be "chaos" in Sri Lanka.

14. (C) This led to the archbishop addressing directly the question of war crimes accountability. He said "my suggestion is, in order to strengthen democracy in Sri Lanka, don't push accountability now." He reasoned that weakening the Rajapaksas could backfire. Moreover, if Sri Lanka were denied GSP-plus or the U.S. were to enact strong economic sanctions, leading to a sharp downturn in the economy, Sri Lanka -- where democracy was not strong now -- could suffer revolution from the right or a coup by the military, which currently had a very strong position in society. The archbishop said this was why he had recently come out publicly in favor of extending GSP-plus to Sri Lanka, despite the GSL's many human rights problems. Ambassador countered that this was a very interesting perspective, but if the Rajapaksas were in fact moderates, they needed to show it in at least a few ways. The archbishop said this was the

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challenge that he had been working on -- how to get the president not to worry only about the "forces lurking beneath him" and to act as a moderate. He told the president it was important to work with Tamil leaders on reconciliation and to invite the diaspora to help re-build the economy. "The Rajapaksas will come and go," the archbishop opined, "but the Tamils will always be here."

COMMENT

15. (C) Archbishop Ranjith purportedly is respected by the pope and served as papal nuncio in Indonesia. He also commands considerable authority in Sri Lanka -- despite his problems with the Buddhist right -- and has a good relationship with the president (whose wife is Catholic). It is certainly true that the president is under great pressure from the Sinhalese Buddhist right. It is also arguable that the international community's pushing too hard on accountability could backfire.

FOWLER